

# responding to heterosexist hate

a gender critique of coalitionist strategies in NSW

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Whilst the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project (AVP) continues to set benchmarks and to lead the field in the development of strategies to reduce hate-related violence against gays and lesbians in New South Wales, this paper seeks to show the ways in which these strategies and campaigns fail to adequately address differences in the experiences of gay men and lesbians. Using a sociological framework, combined with a feminist analysis, this paper will highlight the work of the AVP and how it focuses upon incidents of criminal, physical hatred (largely perpetrated against gay men), whilst leaving the harder cases of harassment, discrimination and hate speech silenced. In particular, this paper seeks to problematise the assumptions made about hate-related violence against lesbians in the AVP's *Homophobia. What are ya scared of?* campaign, and its *Count & Counter Report*.

This paper seeks to present a gender critique of coalitionist strategies employed by the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project (AVP) in NSW. Whilst time does not permit a full analysis of projects undertaken by this organisation since its inception in 1991, what I hope to be able to do is show that, from its inception, the AVP has been operating with an understanding of hate-related violence that is decidedly gender biased. I analyse the publicity used in the first two years of the *Homophobia. What are ya scared of? Campaign*. I argue that this reveals a project that fails to understand violence against

lesbians and that rather than undermining gender stereotypes associated with heterosexual violence may actually contribute to these stereotypes.

The arguments that I make within this paper are based largely on the results of data collected from the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project as part of the primary research for my dissertation. These results, in some instances, directly contradict previous studies undertaken by the AVP and the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, and I will argue that the main contributing factor to these differences in results is the relative absence of lesbians in the initial studies. This absence has been remedied in this research project by the deliberate centring of lesbians' experiences of violence. This is illustrated in the decision to collect an equal number of complaint files lodged by gay men and lesbians with the AVP even though there is a ratio of approximately 3:1 in number of complaints lodged. These reports of violence, in addition to 96 complaint files lodged by lesbians and Jews with the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, and 650 complaints lodged by Jews with the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, form the core of a more detailed research project looking at the similarities between different forms of hate violence in NSW. These complaints of violence have been collated via a specifically designed database program called *Tracking Violence*, that offers the ability to compare data across agencies and across different forms of complaint information collection.

## history of research into heterosexual violence in NSW

The Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project first received on-going funding in 1992, after the publication of the *Interim Report of the Streetwatch Implementation Advisory Committee* (Cox, 1992a). The work of activists in the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby since 1990 combined with the interim outcomes of this research, highlighted the need for a community organisation devoted to the elimination of hate-related violence against gays and lesbians in NSW. However, the emergence of the AVP concurrently with the first stages of the *Streetwatch Report* set in place understandings of hate-related violence that were explicitly gender biased. *Streetwatch* was watching the streets. It did not claim to attempt to watch any of the other places, nor tally any of the other forms of hate violence experienced by gay men and lesbians. Seeing hate-related violence against gay men and lesbians as a purely physical, public event prescribed the ways in which the AVP, and other agencies such as the NSW Police Service and the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board could respond to, or indeed attempt to intervene in all forms of violence against gay men and lesbians. The *Streetwatch Report* was developed from the complaints of 63 gay men and 4 lesbians (Cox, 1992a:12), and as such, its findings reflect the public, group nature of violence perpetrated predominantly against gay men. According to the *Streetwatch Report*, the perpetrators of these street-based hate crimes were overwhelmingly young men (in 90% of incidents the perpetrator was under the age of 25), acting in groups of three or more (67% of incidents) against a gay man they do not know (92% of incidents). The violence was also normally not of an on-going nature (only 7% of complainants reported that the incident was on-going) (Cox, 1992a:26-7).

In order to counter balance the gender inequality of *Streetwatch*, a survey of lesbians' experience of hate-related violence was undertaken in 1992 that lead to the publication of *Off Our Backs* (Cox, 1992b), eight months after the *Streetwatch Report*. Again, the focus of *Off Our Backs* was street-based violence. Nevertheless, the profile of perpetrators

of hate-related violence shifts. Of particular note, was the higher likelihood of survivors knowing their perpetrators (38% compared to 8%), and that the violence was of an on-going nature (33% compared to 7%) (Cox, 1992b:24-7). These two characteristics reflect the common ground that lesbians inhabit with women generally. And this is where the common ground between gay men and lesbians begins to get shaky. Cunneen et al, in *Faces of Hate* suggests that a 'hate crime is generally directed towards a class of people; the individual victim is rarely significant to the offender and is most commonly a stranger to him or her' (Cunneen, Fraser and Tomsen, 1997:1). However, for lesbians, particularly in captive audience situations such as work or home, perpetrators are likely to be personally known by the survivor of an act of hate violence.

In 1994, the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project published what was expected to be an annual report of violence against gays and lesbians. *Count & Counter* (Cox, 1994) provided a summary of reports of violence included in the *Streetwatch Report*, *Off Our Backs* and reports of violence taken by the AVP between November 1991 and June 1993. Of the 184 cases used to compile *Count & Counter*, 78 cases were reported by lesbians, of which 42 formed the basis of *Off Our Backs*. When this report is excluded, cases involving lesbians dropped to only 25 per cent. However, with a marginal increase in lesbians' participation in the overall data, the profile of perpetrators of hate-related violence also shifts from that outlined in the *Streetwatch Report*. In *Count & Counter*, even though street-based physical assaults by young men were still the predominant form of violence reported, major differences between this report and the *Streetwatch Report* include the increase of violence perpetrated by older men (40% compared to 10%) and the higher likelihood that the perpetrator is known to the survivor (17% compared to 8%) (Cox, 1994:46,49).

Whilst *Count & Counter* acknowledged that verbal abuse was central to the vast majority of hate-related violence (Cox, 1994:26) and that *Off Our Backs* indicated a higher likelihood of lesbians experiencing verbal abuse only (Cox, 1992b:6), the data relating to perpetrators of violence in both of these reports does not reflect this. This is because

choices made in relation to the methodology meant that results in *Count & Counter* excluded all those cases of verbal abuse only. As such, many of the reports of violence given by lesbians to the AVP have been removed from the data outcomes in *Count & Counter*. And finally, none of the information provided in *Count & Counter* was provided with a gender tabulation in order to be able to clearly see the key difference in experiences of hate-related violence.

As can be seen in the following table, the results of the three studies discussed above are different from those produced from more recent complaint files, and from a data source that ensures gender parity. In *Tracking Violence*, it is clear to see that gay men and lesbians experience heterosexist violence in very different forms. In particular, it is important to note that this contemporary data not only highlights gender differences in experiences, but also that the violence experienced by gay men has changed over the 10 year period between the *Streetwatch Report* and my own analysis in *Tracking Violence*.

Whilst the NSW Police Service get to hear of those incidents of violence that are criminal, and whilst the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board gets to hear about extreme cases of discrimination and harassment, the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project is responsible for advocating on behalf of clients who experience a variety of forms of hate-related violence. Violence as represented by sexual assault or murder, but also violence as represented by on-going verbal abuse. However, the AVP's reports – and its campaign material – have not conveyed this variety in experiences of hate-related violence. Nor has there been adequate reference to the continuum that exists between anti-gay and anti-lesbian hate speech, harassment and discrimination and the more public, hostile hatred represented by hate crimes such as murder and sexual assault.

There are many historical and cultural reasons why lesbians have not participated in or used the services of the AVP in greater numbers. Anecdotal information from Client Advocates such as Karen Smith, Karina Quinn, Liza-Mare Syron and myself indicates that more lesbians are reporting, but what they are reporting and how this may differ from the reports of violence involving gay men is left uninvestigated by the organisation. As such, the

AVP has continued to use the findings in the *Count & Counter* Report and the *Streetwatch Report* as a basis for all funding applications, campaign development or service delivery even though there are grounds to argue that neither report adequately addresses the concerns of lesbians.

The AVP has gone through several major shifts in focus over the last eight years of its operation. I would argue that the most significant shift occurred in 1994/5 when the AVP changed its campaign target from survivors of hate-related violence to perpetrators of hate-related violence. Using the results of *Count & Counter* as a starting point, the AVP developed a perpetrator education campaign directed at young people. The philosophy behind this change might be summarised as 'why gaol a 25 year old for hate-related murder, when, with a little ingenuity, you can re-educate young people to never hold these hate filled ideas?' But this shift in focus was also directed by government funding. The newly emerged Department of Juvenile Justice offered the AVP a new set of funds. However, by shifting to a perpetrator framework, the AVP also highlighted its gender biased understanding of who the perpetrators were. Whilst the majority of street-based violence against gay men was perpetrated by people under 25 years of age, evidence in *Tracking Violence*, shows that violence against lesbians is more often perpetrated by men over the age of 25 years. Again, just as with the emergence of the AVP along with the *Streetwatch Report*, the shift from survivor education to perpetrator education has contributed to a re-inscription of not only what constitutes a hate crime against gays and lesbians, but also what possible responses are available.

## the campaigns

Having provided this background to the way in which the AVP deals with reports of violence, and how these results can contribute to a biased interpretation of hate violence, I would now like to turn to the AVP's *Homophobia. What are ya scared of?* campaign. The first and most pressing point I would like to make about this campaign, and the general mission of the AVP, is the notion of homophobia itself. Homophobia implies a fear, just as with agoraphobia or arachnophobia. In the case of homophobia, it is the fear of people perceived to be gay or lesbian. However, in my experience

as an Advocate, the majority of fear lies with gays and lesbians: fear of verbal abuse, fear of physical assault. If we are to perceive of homophobia as a fear of difference – sexual difference – then this is not a sovereign psychological moment of fear in individual perpetrators, but rather a structured, social event that is sustained by more than just individual neuroses. Just as with sexism and racism, violence against gay men and lesbians must be seen as a complex web of individual and social interactions, fully supported by political structures.

Given these reasons, I prefer to talk of heterosexist violence. Heterosexist violence incorporates debates about not only sexuality, but also gender and its bounded roles. However, in shifting from homophobia to heterosexist violence, campaigns such as the AVP's *Homophobia. What are ya scared of?* may be less effective in dealing with the intersections of sexuality and gender. This is because its target is individual action: 'what are YOU scared of?' rather than the cultural and historical contexts that underscore the structures of prejudice.

This campaign, like the operation of the AVP in general, has received the National Heads of Government Violence Prevention Award. This award is in recognition of the AVP's attempt to modify education strategies in order to 'speak' directly to young people. By utilising 'heroes', or role models of young people, *Homophobia. What are ya scared of?* sought to legitimise the issues of eliminating violence against gays and lesbians in mainstream popular culture. Considered one of the campaign's coups, the use of the presenters from the NSW Footy Show hit heterosexism where it was considered most likely to reside: in the macho, sweaty world of sport. This poster, combined with Terminator from the Gladiators Show and an AFL Footy poster in the following year's campaign, all sought to tackle heterosexism at its core: in the extreme gender stereotype of masculinity and its perceived relative strength or weakness.

In reports of violence to the AVP, verbal abuse directed at gay men often cited the intended victim's perceived weakness or femininity as motives for the abuse and sometimes, the consequential physical assault. Viewing homosexuality in this way, the perceived womanly characteristics of gay men undermine the notion of what is masculine,

what is other than woman or feminine. Physical assault of gay men is also representative of the stereotype that gay men are effeminate and as such not capable of defending themselves from assault. As such, the use of macho sports figures seeks to show that manly men can still be OK about homosexuality: that men can 'tackle' or 'take the challenge to confront homophobia'. But are these heroes good role models for undermining the gender, rather than sexuality, stereotypes that play a substantial part in violence against gay men?

At the same time that these posters were providing role models for young men, the AVP sought a similar contribution from female role models. Search far and wide. Think about a woman that could provide the same kind of mainstream support for this campaign. Maybe Cathy Freeman ... maybe Natasha Stott Despoja ... maybe. Whilst boys/men require outgoing sports stars to act as heroes, the girls/women in this campaign get TV stars such as Kate Fisher, who tell us that 'homophobia is just plain ugly'. When you are talking about lesbians, notions of femininity and relative beauty or ugliness are central gender stereotypes that contribute to anti-lesbian violence. In reports to the AVP, verbal abuse encountered by lesbians focussed on their visual appearance and its conformity or non-conformity to gender stereotypes. Moreover, as opposed to the active demands of 'tackling' and 'taking the challenge' in the boys' campaign, girls were asked to say 'NO to homophobia'. Again as in the case of the boys/men's campaign, is it appropriate to use these same stereotypes in combating heterosexist violence as a form of counter-discourse? I would argue that it only contributes to the re-inscription of the boundaries defining acceptable and unacceptable sexual and gender difference because it carries into the campaign all the baggage surrounding gender constructs, and as such gender violence.

By using the statistics about hate-related violence in the *Count & Counter* Report, the AVP's *Homophobia. What are ya scared of?* campaign has fixed understandings about hate crimes that do not adequately reflect the needs of lesbians living with violence on a daily basis. It portrays violence against gay men and lesbians as the same, whilst only targeting street-based violence, which is

largely perpetrated against gay men. The statistics offered for any analysis of this field are always going to be tainted by the self-selective nature of reporting anti-gay or anti-lesbian violence. This results in not only a slice of the cake (as with domestic violence and sexual abuse), but it also results in a gendered slice of the cake. Those survivors reporting to the AVP, reported in very gendered ways, such as that lesbians were rarely shocked or outraged by acts of heterosexism, whilst many gay men could not believe what was happening to them. Lesbians are more likely to accept personal violence as part of gendered cultural life, whilst men take it as an affront to their basic human rights. As a consequence, there are more reports of violence from gay men. I do not believe this is a result of higher levels of violence against gay men. Rather, I believe that lesbians continue to under report incidents of violence and fail to follow through on reports. As such, the picture portrayed of heterosexist violence in the AVP's *Homophobia. What are ya scared of?* campaign does match the majority of the statistics offered in this field. The problem is that these statistics, the ways in which they are collated, and the analysis of the findings are all biased by the absence of lesbians' narratives.

In *Faces of Hate*, the editors claim that '... violence against women is in itself a complex area with its own explanatory framework and is of an essentially

different nature to what might be grasped within the notion of a hate crime' (Cunneen, Fraser and Tomsen, 1997:2). Apart from being one of the most dismissive comments I have read regarding the nature of hate violence, this statement reflects the major problem that occurs when trying to address the very different nature of violence against lesbians and gay men. When do lesbians stop being women? And when does violence against lesbians stop being violence against women? What I have sought to show in this paper is that there exists in campaigns such as *Homophobia. What are ya scared of?* an underlying sexism, or gender inequality that not only sustains a sexist view of what constitutes a hate crime, but also re-inscribes gender stereotypes that contribute to new ways in which heterosexist violence is perpetrated and interpreted.

## references

- Cox, Gary, (1992a), *Interim Report of the Streetwatch Implementation Advisory Committee*, Sydney: NSW Anti-Discrimination Board.
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- Cox, Gary (1994), *Count & Counter*, Sydney: Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project.
- Cunneen, Chris, Fraser, David and Tomsen, Stephen (1997), 'Introduction', in C Cunneen, D Fraser and S Tomsen (Eds), *Faces of Hate: Hate Crime in Australia*, Sydney: Hawkins Press.

**Table:** Comparison of key characteristics of hate violence against gay men and lesbians in reports of violence to the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project

### Tracking Violence<sup>2</sup>

145 Respondents (1995–2000)	Lesbians	Respondents	Gay Men	Respondents
Sex of perpetrator(s) <sup>1</sup>	Female (imputed)	22%	Female (imputed)	1%
Age of perpetrator	≤ 25 years	50%	≤ 25 years	41%
Perpetrator(s) known?	Yes	33%	Yes	23%
Single perpetrator?	Yes	47%	Yes	43%
Verbal abuse?	Yes	78%	Yes	67%
Violence ongoing?	Yes	30%	Yes	29%
Witnesses?	Yes	61%	Yes	49%
Witnesses intervened?	Yes	27%	Yes	32%
Place of violence	Street	39%	Street	49%
Police notified?	Yes	48%	Yes	51%

### Notes

1. Perpetrators of violence often acted in combinations of men and women. For this table, all of these cases have been equally divided between male and female perpetrators.
2. Tracking Violence is the name of a database designed by Nicole Asquith and Karen Smith using Filemaker Pro software. It is designed to read violence across agencies, and across different forms of hate violence. This database will form the basis of Nicole Asquith's Dissertation at the Key Centre for Women's Health, University of Melbourne. This dissertation – titled *Social Hate Discourse: Intersections in the Practices and Regulation of Antisemitic and Heterosexist Hate Violence in NSW* – will be submitted to the Faculty of Medicine in July 2003.